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ABSTRACT

The personal experience of an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instructor is recounted in this discussion of how to teach non- or limited-English speaking students. With only 18 hours of ESL training, the instructor began teaching her first ESL students. The immediacy of feedback was recognized as a great advantage. Characteristics of effective teaching methods were found to include the following: comprehensible input, or giving students information they are able to understand; presentation of information in context; learning situations that are relevant and meaningful; purpose, or learning driven by real needs; comfort, or non-threatening learning situations; respect for native language and culture; and integration of literacy tasks around a theme or focus. Several successful methods and components are briefly summarized: Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR); TPR plus action songs, chants, and finger plays; the Language Experience Approach; shared reading; writing without a pencil (e.g., video, artwork, tape recordings); dialogue journals; text sets, in which known structures are applied to new learnings; readers' theatre and creative dramatics; participatory learning; the buddy system; and parent involvement. Contains 10 references. (LB)

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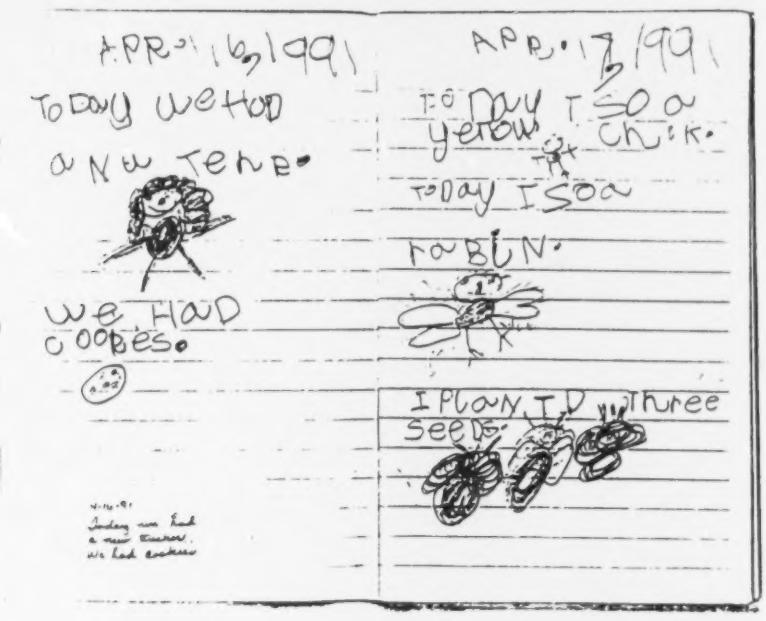

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"No, Mother, I Don't Speak Japanese": Learning to Teach in an ESL Classroom

by
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When I began teaching English as a Second Language, people who had known me well all of my life suddenly assumed that I must be proficient in several foreign languages. In fact, I don't speak, or understand, any of the native languages of my students. In an ideal world, my students would have bilingual teachers who could teach them in their first languages, while helping them to acquire English language skills. But this is the real world, and they have me.

When the telephone rang one morning in January 1990, I wasn't surprised to hear my principal's voice on the other end of the line. I was a substitute, frequently contacted at the last moment to fill in for absent teachers. This call, however, was different. Our district had acquired two students, recently arrived from India to join their new American family. There was just one problem . . . the girls, ages five and seven, didn't speak English. Would I be interested in teaching them English for an hour or two each day?

"YES!" I didn't hesitate for a minute. "When can I start?" We discussed the details. When I hung up the phone, I was elated. I had a JOB!

It wasn't long before I came back down to earth with a thud. Although I was an experienced elementary school teacher, my main (perhaps only) qualification for this position was that I was available. I wasn't licensed in ESL; I would be teaching under a variance granted by the Minnesota State Department of Education. "How," I asked myself, "can you teach them, if you don't speak their language, and they don't speak yours?" I have since been asked that same question innumerable times by teachers, administrators, parents, friends, and acquaintances. The answer is at the same time simple, and amazingly complex:

I learned how to teach from the children.

Dr. Linda Miller-Cleary, writing Language Arts Belief Statements for the Minnesota Department of Education's Model Learner Outcomes for Language Arts Education (1988), provides insights into the language development process which help to explain that answer:

> Most significant in our humanness is our innate tendency to acquire language. Language is a tool by which we can satisfy our need to understand the world and through which we can understand how it acts upon us. Language also permits us to satisfy our need for self-expression, and it is through that self-expression that we can find power to act upon our world. The very human processes of listening, speaking, thinking, reading, and writing are inextricably interrelated processes whose primary impetus comes from our need to understand and from our need to express ourselves. (p. 19)

Children do possess a built-in tendency to acquire language that is driven by a powerful need to understand and to be understood. It is that force which enables my students to grow and to learn—though we have no language in common, we have our humanity. Fortunately, in the beginning, that is enough. . . .

Armed with a certificate of completion of 18 hours of instruction from the State Department of Education, and bolstered by the support and advice of my colleagues, I began

what was to be, essentially, on-the-job training. Just how *was* I going to teach them? Would our first day be filled with agonizing silences? Would two hours seem like two years? Would they cry? Would I cry? Had I bitten off more that I could chew? Only time would tell.

And time *has* had a tale to tell. My class has expanded to include students from several language backgrounds, at several grade levels. Over a year has passed since that first, doubt-filled day, a year filled with learning for me—of insights, experiences, and understandings that have forever changed my conceptions of what it means to teach and to learn.

Early on, I discovered what is perhaps the greatest advantage to teaching students of limited English proficiency—the immediacy of feedback. When something works, and students understand the expected task, they respond appropriately. When they *don't* understand, it is instantly obvious. Blank, questioning looks, "eh?"s, headshakings, and furrowed brows indicate that a new approach is required. What works, works. What doesn't work, doesn't work. There is very little room for doubt.

I soon noticed that the most effective methods had some characteristics in common:

Comprehensible Input—Steven Krashen uses this term to highlight the importance of giving students information which they are able to comprehend. Obviously, children can't learn if the material presented is beyond them. According to Krashen, optimal learning occurs at "i + 1," when the input is just slightly beyond their current level of proficiency, but within their ability to grasp (Krashen, 1983).

Context—When new information is presented in relationship to something that is already understood, students are much more likely to comprehend. Finding a context which links the new to the known is especially important for LEP students who are often overwhelmed by school environments which are totally foreign to them. In order for learning to occur, connections must be made to the students' prior knowledge.

Meaning—Meaningful, relevant learning situations which connect to the students' real lives facilitate rapid language development. When learners take personal ownership of the learning task, the motivation to succeed is considerably strengthened. In language, as in all learning, there is a strong correlation between motivation and achievement. Students are motivated when the task makes sense to them and has personal meaning (Crawford, 1990).

Purpose—Closely tied to meaning, purposeful learning is driven by real needs, as perceived by the students (Goodman, 1986). Students want to learn what is important to them in order to achieve their own goals. Learning events which allow students to make choices that fulfill their own purposes are more likely to be successful that those which reflect only the teacher's expectations.

Comfort—Krashen uses the term "low affective filter" to describe non-threatening learning situations. Anxiety is a real barrier to learning, so classroom environments and learning tasks for LEP students need to be as non-stressful as possible (Krashen, 1983).

Respect—Students need to know that their own language and culture are valued and respected. Cultural differences need to be taken into account as they impact upon the students' adjustment to the school environment.

Integration—When literacy tasks are integrated around a central theme or focus, LEP students are much better able to make the connections necessary for learning to occur. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening events tied to a purposeful topic promote language growth.

Holistic teaching was much more successful than attempting to teach skills in isolation. The more context I could provide, the more rapidly my students progressed.

Observing their progress, and building on their successes, I was learning, along with the children, what language development is all about. Perhaps the most significant realization, for me, was that teaching and learning in an ESL classroom are really not very different from teaching and learning in any other classroom. Second languages are acquired in the same way that first languages are, gradually and naturally, through need-driven, genuinely communicative situations.

Some of the methods and techniques I used were new to me, learned through workshops and university courses, and some were familiar, used throughout my years of teaching. A partial list of the most successful would include:

TPR (and a smile)—A Place to Start

James Asher's Total Physical Response method of teaching language started us off that very first day on the road to communicating. The philosophy behind TPR (supported by research) is that concepts are more readily retained when they are accompanied by a physical action. The command/response "Simon Says" type format was immediately comprehensible to the two shy, dark-eyed angels who would teach me so much (Asher, 1982).

"Stand."

"Sit."

"Stand. . .walk. . .stop."

"Turn. . .walk. . .stop. . .turn. . .sit."

"Stand. . . walk to the table. . .walk to the door . . .open the door. . .close the door."

"Walk to the table. . .pick up the crayon. . .put down the crayon. . .pick up the pencil. . .write your name."

With amazing rapidity, the girls increased their vocabulary, quickly mastering most of the "survival" words they would need in order to begin to be integrated into regular classrooms. They were soon ready to move beyond the simple say-do language into more complex structures.

TPR Plus—Action Songs, Chants, and Finger Plays

Retaining the advantage of physical actions (but a great deal more fun) action songs, chants, and finger plays also added rhyme, rhythm, and predictability. Repeated language patterns, easily remembered, provided a non-threatening format for expanding vocabulary, and introducing grammar and syntax.

The lively "hoe-down" rhythm of the music of a song like "Salt and Pepper Shake," fast-paced actions accompanying the words are wonderful for developing rate and fluency along with vocabulary (Addison Wesley ESL, Level A, 1989).

LEA—In Their Own Words

The Language Experience Approach served as the gateway to reading and writing skills (Dickson & Nessel, 1983). Student-dictated stories, teacher-scripted on chart paper or written on the chalkboard to be read together, showed the children that their words were important and meaningful and could be preserved and recalled and shared through specific written forms. Figure 1 is an example of an LEA story produced by primary LEP students as part of a Halloween unit (see Figure 1).

Smile, Smile, Jack-o-Lantern

Jill said, "You need a knife."
Nao said, "You need a pumpkin."
Ashley said, "You cut the top off and you save the top."
Everyone said, "You take out the seeds."
Jill said, "You carve eyes and nose and mouth."
Yusuke said, "You make it look mad."
Nao said, "You need a light."

Figure 1

After carving a pumpkin, the students recalled their actions in sequence to create a story. Student's names were used in a dialogue format for pattern and recognition. Each child contributed a sentence or sentences, and illustrated them. The completed story remained in the classroom "I can read" basket for SSR and Reader's Chair times.

Shared Reading—Everyone Can Join In

Choral reading, Big Books, and pattern and predictable stories, read together or "echo-read," enable everyone to successfully participate in reading experiences in a non-threatening, enjoyable manner (Holdaway, 1979). Mini-books can be purchased or created which allow students to have their own personal copies of the stories they have learned to read.

Writing Without a Pencil—Composing Before Mastering Mechanics

Students can create stories before they have mastered letter formation. The camera, the video camera, artwork, the tape recorder, typewriter, or word processor can all be used by students to create meaningful compositions as they work to master the mechanics of writing (Hayes, 1988).

Dialogue Journals—Writing to Talk

Using dialogue journals helps the children make the connection between written and spoken language. Initially, the teacher, using an interview format, scripts the dialogue. As students progress in their writing abilities, journals can take on a letter-like format, with students writing to teachers, or to other students. Dialogue journals also provide valuable anecdotal records of student growth in language acquisition. Figure 2 illustrates the dialogue journal conversations of a kindergarten student, with a six month interval between examples.

Dialogue Journal-April

Teacher: What would you like to tell me about?
Student: Apple, banana, cherry.
Teacher: What did you do last night?
Student: Fall down. TV. Grapes.
Teacher: What did you watch on TV?
Student: Monkey—garbage.
Teacher: What did the monkey do?
Student: Swing, paint hat, tree. Daddy, monkey.

Dialogue Journal-October

Teacher: Did you have a good weekend?
Student: Yes.
Teacher: Did you carve a pumpkin?
Student: Yes.
Teacher: What did you do first?
Student: Cut it—we save the top.
Teacher: What did you do next?
Student: You take the weeds out with hands and big spoon.
Teacher: What did you a[illegible] after you took the weeds out?
Student: Jills and Ashleys and us and Kims and Brians is outside.
Teacher: Did you make a face on the pumpkin?
Student: Mines is different. Daddy helped me. I didn't do it. Daddy did. Mines is different. Mines is smile. Jill's is sad.
Teacher: What is Brian's pumpkin like?
Student: Brian's is different than all. I don't know rest likes. It's different I can't tell it. Kim's is different too.
Teacher: Did you put candles in it?
Student: No, not yet. We are gonna do it. Almost. Not yet though.
(The dialogue continued, regarding costumes, masks, etc.)

Figure 2

The April conversation took place after just six weeks of exposure to English. The second entry reveals growth in both expressive vocabulary and syntax. Overgeneralization in the use of possessives and tenses is actually an indication that the student is beginning to internalize syntactic patterns.

Text Sets—Known Structures to New Learnings

Nearly all students are familiar with fairy and/folk tales. Many common stories such as "Little Red Riding Hood" have variants or versions in other cultures. Reading a number of such stories builds an awareness of the structure and nature of the genre, enabling students to develop skills in prediction and understanding that transfer well into reading and writing new works in the same genre. This technique can be expanded upon with texts grouped by author, theme, topic, story versions, cultural variants, genre, character, illustrator, Newberry or Caldecott books—any common thread shared by a set of works which encourages students to make comparisons and to seek similarities and differences (Burke, Harste, & Short, 1989). Figure 3 is an example of a fairy tale dictated by a five-year-old LEP student after experiencing a number of fairy tale variants and versions.

Goldilocks and the Witch and the Princess and the Frog

Once upon a time was a witch coming down the road and see one girl and her name Goldilocks. Goldilocks she went upstairs and she saw witch coming the upstairs and she ran downstairs and she got her! Then she got her and she sprinkled her and she is a frog! And the boy kissed her and she back to Goldilocks and she went home and shopped. She went to Pamida and she went to K-Mart looking for dress. And she saw one—a sprinkly dress. And she went to Pizza Hut and she ate some pizza—pepperoni pizza—and she went to the friend house and she go boyfriend. She went to witch house to eat some strawberry cake with apples on 'em and strawberries. She went to look at deers and she went to India. She played with dolls and she went to the orphanage. Then she went to the big airplane and she went to the party then her birthday in August. She went to two birthday, her birthday and other birthday. And she went to look at some real rabbits and she find some cats and she paint and she went to Valentine's to give some Valentines to her friends. She went to look at some birds and she saved them and she took them back home and she feed them cake and some jelly and some Mountain Dude.

Figure 3

Note that this story contains a number of typical fairy tale elements, from wicked witches to magic sprinkles. Not only does the piece reveal this student's knowledge of the particular genre in which she "writes," it also shows us the way in which this reader is making connections between literature and her life, as the heroine's adventures take her to familiar places from the child's own experience.

Readers' Theatre and Creative Dramatics—Language Production Without Stress

Dramatizing familiar stories which have patterned language (Little Pig, Little Pig, let me come in," or "Who's been sitting in my chair?") encourages children in oral language and creativity and builds their level of comfort in language production. The opportunity to "become" a character from a favorite story often overcomes shyness and self-consciousness. Building confidence through participation in dramatics is a first step toward being comfortable in speaking a new language (Sloyer, 1982).

Routines—Predictability Builds Confidence

Establishing daily routines such as marking the calendar and counting the days, or reporting on the weather, helps children know what to expect, and lowers the affective filter by enabling them to anticipate what will happen during the day. Carefully varying routines and suggesting alternatives can provide contextual contrast within and across daily events (Heald-Taylor, 1986).

Participatory Learning—Learning by Doing

Concrete learning activities, such as cooking, planting seeds, building a birdhouse,

or visiting a farm, provide purposeful, relevant learning experiences which encourage language development. When reading, writing, speaking, and listening are centered around real events, language growth is inherent and natural.

Students Helping Students—The Buddy System

Partnering LEP students with native English-speaking students, when done with consideration for the needs and personalities of both, can be invaluable. Students are often the best teachers of other students, and having a friend and mentor at hand can enable the LEP students to be more quickly integrated into the regular classroom.

A Family Affair—Parents Are the Most Important Partners

As in regular education, the parents of LEP students are the ESL program's greatest allies. Success in acquiring English is often directly related to the importance placed on second language development in the students' homes. Parents of LEP students are often genuinely interested in furthering their childrens' English development, but may need help from the ESL program in choosing activities which will foster such growth. Additionally, I have found that my role must often expand to that of family advocate, assisting non-English speaking families in coping with problems that arise on a day-to-day basis. Dealing with bureaucracies within the American system can be extremely frustrating for the families of my students. Any help I have been able to give them has more than paid off in terms of parental support.

This has been a round-about way to answer the question of "How do you teach them?" Perhaps a better answer is, "Any way I can—with gestures, facial expression, pantomime, repeating, rephrasing, emphasizing, acting out, demonstrating, using pictures, charts, records, audio and video tapes, newspapers, environmental print, books of all kinds, poems and songs, games and dramatizations, realia, aides and assistants, parent helpers and community volunteers—anything and everything at my disposal—that's how I teach them." And, by the way, no one has cried.

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Judy Lindquist taught Pre-kindergarten, Kindergarten, First and Second Grades, and Primary Chapter I reading and math, prior to becoming an ESL instructor.

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